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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 TBILISI 000321

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SUBJECT: GEORGIA: ABKHAZ, PROUD BUT NERVOUS -- AND READY TO  
ENGAGE

REF: TBILISI 112

Classified By: Charges d'Affaires A.I. Kent Logsdon for reasons 1.4 (b)  
and (d).

11. (C) Summary and comment. During the first official USG trip to Abkhazia since the August 2008 war, Abkhaz de facto officials and civil society representatives showed new confidence in their so-called independence, but also unease with Russia's increasing influence. They believe Russia's recognition and increased military presence enhance Abkhazia's security, but still crave engagement with other countries, including the U.S. All interlocutors expressed interest in cross-boundary exchanges, as long as they focused on practical issues like health care and avoided status questions. De facto "foreign minister" Shamba, however, said diplomats accredited in Tbilisi would no longer be allowed to visit; it is not clear how firm this policy is since the EU Ambassador from Tbilisi was received by Shamba the same day. The December 2009 elections for de facto "president" are already encouraging political posturing and possibly limiting officials' flexibility, including on the diplomatic access issue. Russia's contribution to the Abkhaz budget has increased dramatically; a failure to meet its commitments in 2009 could cause real political difficulties. The USG may be able to find ways to re-engage with Abkhazia, but will likely need to be careful how it articulates the goals of that engagement in light of our support for Georgia's territorial integrity. (See septel about serious human rights concerns in Gali.) End summary and comment.

TO ENGAGE OR NOT TO ENGAGE? THE DE FACTO VIEW

12. (C) EUR/CARC Advisor on the South Caucasus Conflicts Michael Carpenter and EmbOff traveled to Abkhazia February 12-13 and met in separate meetings with de facto "foreign minister" Sergey Shamba and de facto "presidential" representative for the Gali region Ruslan Kishmaria. Carpenter met one-on-one with de facto "national security council secretary" Stanislav Lakoba, who refused to see a diplomat accredited to Tbilisi. With the media present, Shamba began speaking with a confident air about Abkhazia's so-called independence as an established fact. He expressed strong disapproval of U.S. policy toward Abkhazia, offering a historical justification of Abkhazia's claim to independence and suggesting that U.S. recognition of the new reality was only a matter of time. Carpenter made clear that the U.S. policy of commitment to Georgia's sovereignty and territorial integrity remained unchanged. Shamba said that Abkhazia felt more secure than before its declared independence and saw enormous economic opportunities with its Russian partner. He made clear, however, that Abkhazia was interested in engagement with the rest of the world, including the United States. He complained that other countries, in particular

the U.S., had pushed Abkhazia into a corner "like a wolf" and forced it toward its single partner. Kishmaria said half-jokingly that Abkhazia has been free for 15 years, but now is independent (i.e., but no longer free). Shamba expressed support for a continued UN presence in Abkhazia, although he insisted the name would have to change from a UN mission in Georgia. Carpenter made clear that the U.S. valued continued dialogue with Abkhazia, and at the end of the meeting, Shamba dropped his adversarial pose and remarked with apparent sincerity on the importance of the U.S. speaking with Abkhaz "officials" -- a sentiment he later repeated to the Abkhaz press.

13. (C) Shamba also said, however, that diplomats accredited in Tbilisi would no longer be welcome in Abkhazia. EmbOff suggested such a policy would make engagement difficult, arguing that using this particular issue to make a political point about Abkhazia's status would hurt its own stated interest in engagement in return for little, if any, gain. Shamba did seem to leave the door open for future visits, saying that meetings might be possible on a case-by-case basis for specific purposes. (Note: An internal debate among de facto officials on the wisdom of accepting Tbilisi-accredited diplomats recently came out in the open in the Abkhaz press, with Shamba arguing for more flexibility and Lakoba -- who refused to see EmbOff -- taking a hard line. Current official policy is apparently not to receive them; although no one has yet been denied permission to travel, some Tbilisi-based ambassadors told us that they have been informally asked not to ask. EmbOff received permission to travel, however, and EU Ambassador to Georgia Per Eklund also traveled to Abkhazia February 12, and was received by de

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facto "officials" so this issue is probably not fully settled. See also reftel. End note.)

14. (C) A UN political officer in Sukhumi explained some of the political circumstances shaping the de factos' attitudes at the moment. He said the upcoming December 2009 election of a new de facto president was the foremost issue on everyone's mind, with the competition already "severe," and de facto officials were already toughening their stances with the elections in mind. He also noted, however, that Russia's support for Abkhazia's budget was planned to increase dramatically. The budget would rise from the equivalent of \$59 million in 2008 to \$144 million in 2009, with Russia providing the lion's share of the money. A large chunk of this increase has reportedly been allotted to salaries of civil servants, including one third of the entire budget going to law enforcement salaries -- a useful step in an election year, as the UN officer noted, but not a helpful investment in Abkhazia's long-term development. He also questioned whether Russia could maintain this level of support this year, considering its own financial difficulties, or into the future, and suggested any default on these promises would have major repercussions on internal Abkhaz politics.

#### CROSS-BOUNDARY OPPORTUNITIES

15. (C) Carpenter asked if Shamba saw opportunities for engagement across the boundary. Shamba said he saw value in practical projects, such as those on the human level that would improve the lives of Gali residents, but warned that the specifics were important. The goal must not be the re-establishment of Georgia's territorial integrity, and he could not accept contacts with organizations affiliated with the Georgian government. He approved of contacts between NGOs, adding that some connections already exist. He said a good first step would be to allow Abkhaz students who are offered U.S. scholarships, such as Fulbrights, to travel on their existing (i.e., Russian) passports. According to him, past cases in which students earned a scholarship, but were then asked to travel on a Georgian passport, sowed resentment

toward the U.S. among the Abkhaz people. He added the public attitude toward the government's actions would be especially important this year, as Abkhazia moves towards so-called presidential elections in December. Shamba also expressed acceptance of the dispute resolution mechanism currently under negotiation in the Geneva talks.

¶6. (C) Kishmaria likewise expressed approval of cross-boundary engagement, noting that some contacts have been maintained all along. He was particularly receptive to cooperation in health care. He objected to Georgian official involvement, as well as that of the Abkhaz government-in-exile. Kishmaria said that local residents fear Georgian provocations and the only solution was a tightly controlled boundary, with barbed wire and six official crossing points. When asked about sniper and other attacks on Georgian police officers, Kishmaria did not deny that they had happened, but again said a strong boundary was the answer. He expressed willingness to cooperate with a dispute resolution mechanism, although he questioned whether such institutions, such as the previous quadripartite meetings in Chuburkhinji, added much value.

TO ENGAGE OR NOT TO ENGAGE? CIVIL SOCIETY'S VIEW  
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¶7. (C) Representatives of non-governmental organizations also expressed genuine pride in Russia's recognition; one said that "by the way, we are separated, not separatists anymore."

Although they generally recognized that Russia's influence was growing in ways that were not necessarily in Abkhazia's best interest, and in some cases could be a catastrophe for Abkhazia, they also felt that the August war had made cooperation with Georgian organizations more complicated. Representatives of the Center for Humanitarian Programs (CHP), which has been quite active in bringing Georgians and Abkhaz (and Ossetians) together for reconciliation activities, said that some in Abkhazia were now questioning the appropriateness of such activities as confidence building, peacebuilding, or even dialogue. Some in fact wanted to turn away from Georgia and Georgians completely, believing that Georgia's so-called aggression against South Ossetia could just as easily have been directed against Abkhazia. Nevertheless, the CHP representatives did still see engagement as important, focusing on such concrete possibilities for cooperation as AIDS prevention. They

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objected to calls for projects that included a provision that the project promote the reintegration of Georgia, however.

¶8. (C) Khashig Inal, editor of the independent newspaper Chegemaskaia Pravda, welcomed Abkhazia's recognition by Russia and noted that many were still "dizzy" in their excitement. He added, however, that it was easy to sit back and think that nothing more needs to be done, allowing Russia to take responsibility for such specific elements of Abkhazia's so-called independence as security and the budget -- and thereby render newly "independent" Abkhazia dependent. Echoing the UN political officer, he noted that 60% of Abkhazia's budget is currently paid by Russia, but that only the intellectuals currently understood the implications of that fiscal dependence. He pointed to InterRAO's deal with the Georgian government to manage the Enguri Hydropower Station as an example of how Russia tends to make decisions about Abkhazia without consulting Abkhazia. Inal also blamed the U.S. for encouraging this dependence on Russia, suggesting the obligatory "territorial integrity" language in projects alienated the Abkhaz and pushed them toward Russia in the social, economic and military spheres. He said that, unlike South Ossetia, Abkhazia has never wanted to be part of Russia -- but if Abkhazia's economic dependence on Russia continues, it will probably join Russia in ten years or so. He encouraged increased U.S. and European investment in Abkhazia, but said that, no matter how much money was offered, Abkhazia would never re-enter Georgia.

¶9. (C) Ethnically Georgian members of the Human Rights Center in Gali expressed their interest in economic connections across the boundary. They said other areas that needed attention from outside Abkhazia were human rights issues and legal assistance. They proposed information centers that would help inform people about their human rights and how to protect them. Likewise, a small business center, perhaps that issued grants, would be helpful. They suggested that joint Abkhaz and Georgian businesses could work together to strengthen the local economy and protect themselves against criminal activity (see septel on human rights concerns in Gali).

COMMENT: THE TIME IS RIPE, BUT GO EASY

¶10. (C) It is clear that representatives of all different groups and levels of Abkhaz society are sincerely interested in renewed engagement with the United States. Although Russia's recognition has given them a new level of confidence, even arrogance, about their political future, it has also driven home the reality of their current isolation in the shadow of their northern neighbor. Thus, while they will be even less willing to make compromises on questions of status (hence their ill-conceived policy of not accepting Tbilisi-accredited diplomats), they will be perhaps even more willing to establish relationships with various partners (hence their unwillingness to commit fully to the "no-Tbilisi-diplomats" policy). If Russia does not deliver the promised huge increases in fiscal support, there will likely be a significant political backlash against both the current de facto authorities and their Russian backers -- and therefore even more opportunity for greater engagement with others. The task for the USG is to identify programs and projects that address specific needs and start to rebuild Qprojects that address specific needs and start to rebuild connections across the boundary, while avoiding too blatant a discussion of any underlying goals of promoting Georgia's territorial integrity. Recent conversations with Georgian officials suggest they will support renewed engagement as well, although not at the cost of recognition -- or anything that might imply recognition.

LOGSDON